Pacing: The Art of Riding Your Own Ride

For those of us who ride, many have felt that horrid feeling in our stomachs when the horse we're on is feeling more like a runaway freight train than a well-trained, responsive trail horse. Blistered hands, sore shoulders, stiff backs and necks and tired legs are the result of trying to control those demon-possessed horses. Whatever got into them? Of course, they are all perfect angels at home on their own trails.

And what is the big deal anyway? So what if one's horse wants to run up front with the "hot shoes"? Nearly every control judge and treatment vet has heard at least once, "He just felt so good, Doc. He was keeping up just fine, Doc."

Why can't horses be allowed to just rate themselves and go as fast as they want on the trail? Why do we control judges cringe when we hear the inevitable, "I tried to slow him down, Doc. He was just pulling my arms out of the sockets"? Ultimately, the horse that is not well paced and ridden within the level of his ability will usually not finish the ride at best, and at worst suffer a metabolic crisis requiring treatment.

Why are horses so good at fooling their owners into thinking everything is all right, until suddenly everything is so wrong? It's because horses are herd animals and work hard at maintaining a connection with the herd, therefore pacing themselves at whatever speed is necessary to remain with the group.

It is only when that work is no longer required and the adrenaline that was needed to keep up dissipates (i.e., at a control checkpoint) that the damage from going too fast becomes readily apparent. Horses that have been allowed to go too fast usually have difficulty recovering their heart rate, often develop colic and can even suffer from exhaustion syndrome.

Finding the right pace

So how do you pace your horse appropriately during an endurance ride? As a rider and an endurance veterinarian, I see this as one of the most paramount responsibilities the rider has to his or her mount. Being a competitive rider myself, no one knows better how hard it is to control a speed-intoxicated endurance horse, especially one that is bred to be hot to begin with.

Proper pacing during ride day is achieved through two pathways:

- Rider knowledge and education
- Training and schooling of the horse.

To begin with, the rider must understand rates, pacing and how their own horse feels traveling at any given speed (without the benefit of a GPS). Second, to implement a particular pace or speed while riding or racing, the horse must be adequately trained to respond and obey the rider's cues and wishes.

The easiest and fastest way to learn how a certain speed feels on your horse is to ride with a GPS. While I did say earlier one should know how fast the horse is going without the benefit of a GPS, this is only because none of us should become hostages to toys and technology, as sometimes those toys break. In reality I train with a GPS every ride.

Over time, with the use of a GPS, it is easy to develop a sense of speeds while riding. In general a fast walk is 4 to 5 mph, a slow trot 6 mph, a moderate trot 8 mph, and a fast trot is 9 to 10 mph.

Slow canters usually come in around 10 to 12 mph and an FEI race canter will likely be around 13 to 16 mph, with a high-end canter or hand gallop being around 15 to 18 mph.

Without the benefit of a GPS, one can map out a course with exact distances and measure the time it takes to complete that course using different gaits.

In addition to using GPS technology, I strongly recommend all riders train with a heart rate monitor, my favorite systems being those that have both capabilities on the same wrist monitor. Why does one need to train with a heart rate monitor? Because the quickest and easiest way to know whether your horse can handle the speed you are asking it to go is by watching its heart rate.

Remember, we expect endurance horses to work for extended periods of time; this translates into horses needing to work within their aerobic thresholds. To do aerobic work, a system functions with oxygen, and does not exceed the system's metabolic need for oxygen.

An example of working beyond the oxygen level is sprinting work, or hill climbing. Most of us have all felt that burn in our own muscles running up a hill or going up stairs too fast. The burn comes from the cells being powered predominantly from glycogen to meet the extreme needs of the muscle cell. The problem of doing this kind of work is that it is short-lived and the cells fatigue quickly.

Therefore, to keep an endurance horse going all day long, one must be careful to keep the horse's system out of the

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anaerobic range (without oxygen). For most horses the standard recommendation is to not exceed working heart rates of 150 beats per minute. Most horses with heart rates of 160 on up are likely experiencing some level of anaerobic work and are therefore at risk of fatigue.

The use of the GPS and heart rate monitor paired together on the same wristband allows the rider to see the speed and heart rate at the same time, then feel the speed of the horse underneath them, and to ultimately develop that sense of the ideal pace for their horse based on the terrain they are riding.

One should never forget that horses are fantastic natural athletes. Most horses can maintain very fast speeds for considerable distances with their ears up and with eager strides, yet all the while they could potentially be working with heart rates that are too high and not sustainable over the long day.

These animals—without the benefit of heart rate monitoring—could feel perfectly fine to their unsuspecting riders, until suddenly they are very much not fine and are struggling to either keep up or recover their metabolic parameters at a control checkpoint.

A final point: horses should train at home at the same pace or speed that is expected of them at a ride. In other words, do not train routinely at home at a 6 mph pace and then expect a horse to perform well at a ride traveling at an 8 or 10 mph pace.

Training to ride your own ride

Once a rider feels comfortable knowing the best pace for his or her own horse, how does a rider practice the concept of "ride your own ride"? Proper pacing training begins not even on the trail but in an arena with schooling exercises. The ability to control a horse on the trail begins with a horse that is obedient and responsive to basic exercises in an arena, both in hand and under saddle.

I am a big fan of natural horsemanship (but not of any particular style), and feel it provides the quickest, most humane methods to forge a working relationship with one's horse. Before I ever take a horse on the trail, or even get in the saddle for the first time for that matter, I make sure the horse has mastered the neck flexions, understands lateral movement and that I have control of the shoulder, hip and middle of the horse on each side, independently of each other.

Using classical training methods I also make sure the horse understands a half-halt. In addition a one-rein stop is essential before venturing out on the trail. It is not uncommon for me to acquire a new horse that is already under saddle going down the trail, yet I have to go backwards and teach the horse the exercises described above.

Once moving down the trail, I practice all of the same exercises that we mastered in the arena out on the trail. While I am as bad as the next rider in not spending enough time weekly on arena schooling exercises, I do as much as I can on the trail. I don't just saddle up, turn on the GPS and go, go, go until we complete the desired workout.

On-trail exercises usually consist of good stops (including one-rein stops), side passes up to gates or just in the middle of a trail from one side to the other, repeated neck flexions, small circles, and shoulders-in and haunches-in movements. While I don't perform schooling exercises every time I go out on trail to train, I do try to make a concerted effort at consistency, as practice makes perfect!

In addition, as soon as the horse is out on trail performing conditioning rides, now is the time to instill consistency in one's pacing and speed. Practice getting your horse to relax into a set pace on a loose rein, with no need for you to either slow them down or urge them on with your leg. At rides on trail I often see riders that rush ahead, then slow down to a walk or slow jog, then rush on again, only to slow down again in a short time. They will often maintain this pattern of riding for the whole ride.

Physiologically, it is actually much easier on your horse (and probably mentally as well) if you keep your horse's speed fairly constant for longer periods of time, say several miles at the least. It actually requires more energy for a system to speed up and slow down over and over than it does to maintain a consistent pace throughout the exercise.

Once you and your horse have at least a good handle on the steps outlined above, then it's time to "train" your horse to listen to you and not just follow the pack. Many horses do fantastically well at home alone, or with other buddies, but have never been pressured by the common chaos that exists with large numbers of horses coming and going on the trail during an endurance ride.

This is where you need some good friends to ride with; in my case I use my kids and their horses. Start a ride with everyone leaving in a group together. If only one other horse is available to work with, most often that is even enough. Go along at least a couple of miles to give the horses a chance to settle in. When ready, tell your friends to go on a little without you. This is where it gets dicey.

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Your horse's temperament and your confidence level will dictate how far ahead you let the group get. If you have a reasonable handle on your horse and you think he will listen well, or he does not get too upset by others leaving him, then let them get almost out of eyesight but not quite. If your horse is the opposite of this and needs his buddies desperately and/or you really don't want to provoke a fight, then just put several horse lengths between you and your buddies' horses.

Predictably, most horses will start trying to rush ahead, grab the bit, pull on the bit, etc. Some horses might even bolt ahead; some might have a hissy fit right in the middle of the trail in an attempt to get rid of you so they can rush back to the safety of their friends. Be ready for any and all types of evasion tactics.

Start first with mild half-halts and using a stiff seat to signal to the horse you want him to slow down and follow your direction, not the group ahead. If that does not work—and in most cases in the beginning it will not be enough—then one has to use neck flexions/lateral flexions, or even a full one-rein stop if the horse is really losing its mind. If you have to resort to the one-rein stop, be ready as the group will get even further ahead and that might unsettle your horse even more.

In my hands, I use the one-rein stop fairly frequently in the beginning. Once the horse is stopped I practice neck flexions from the saddle ad nauseam until the horse settles and he seems back on the planet with me. Then we start again and move up until we either see the group again (but I ask the horse to hang back) or I allow the horse to reconnect but then ask him to slow down again fairly soon and let the group move away once again. I will do this over and over during the course of one ride.

Like all training exercises, this does take some sensitivity and finesse, as you don't want the horse to be reduced to a frothing, dripping, panicked animal that is no longer thinking. Every horse is different, and how much pressure they will tolerate before blowing up is different.

Your job is to create just the right amount of stress that your horse can safely learn from. Some horses only need a few neck flexions and they can move off again. Some will need several minutes of repeated flexions before their jaw softens, their head lowers and they are finally "listening" again.

Once we've had at least a few of these training sessions I can then usually move to using just a subtle neck flexion from the saddle and at the same time use my leg on the same side as my hand to disengage the hip. This does not stop the horse abruptly, but slows the horse, softens the jaw, and lowers the poll. It does not mean that one-rein stops are still not sometimes necessary but most horses with the proper background exercises get the point pretty quick.

When riding with my kids, I will not do these kinds of training rides every time with my young horses. More likely, I may only practice these separation exercises for part of a ride and then go back to riding with the group. But as mentioned earlier, practice makes perfect and repetition is the only road to success.

I realize the suggestions I have provided are not quick-and-easy solutions to the problems of riding a runaway horse during an endurance ride. However, these methods—when applied step by step, with patience and much practice—will eventually result in a mount that will be safe, obedient and fun to ride in any situation and, most importantly, will have the best shot at finishing an endurance ride in good shape. Good luck. *–Jeanette Mero, DVM*